FIFA's double hijabophobia: A colonialist and Islamist alliance racializing Muslim women soccer players

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A B S T R A C T

This paper focuses on FIFA's '*hijab* ban' crisis, or the disqualification of the Iranian women's national soccer team from the 2012 Olympics because the players wore a head cover. Utilizing Arab, Muslim and anti-racist feminist theories, I analyze a colonialist and Islamist patriarchal alliance built on two gendering and racializing logics. I refer to these overlapping logics as 'double hijabophobia.' Both FIFA and Muslim-majority nations used medicalized and cultural notions of the *hijab*, safety and dress laws. Double hijabophobia denies Muslim women players their bodily integrity and excludes them from world football. This analysis also recognizes Muslim women athletes who are working to overcome colonialist and Islamist racializing and gendering logics in sport.

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Introduction

In this paper, I discuss how, in the context of FIFA's ban of the head cover in 2011–2014, two gendering racializing logics emerged that are rooted in a colonialist and Islamist[1] alliance. I refer to these logics as a double hijabophobia. FIFA's ban of the head cover caused a crisis when the players of the national Iranian women's soccer team entered the field to play Jordan for an Olympic qualifying game in 2011. The players were wearing a one-piece head and neck cover. The match commissioner penalized them for violating the International Federation of Football Association (FIFA) Law 4 that refers to the safety and basic equipment law.[2] This decision disqualified the Iranians for the 2012 Olympics.

The double hijabophobia discussed in this paper refers to colonialist and Islamist regulation of *Muslim*[3] women's bodies on the soccer field. Colonialist hijabophobia is an Islamophobic, racializing discourse, targeting Muslim women wearing an 'Islamic' head cover (Zine, 2006). In this paper, I argue that Islamist hijabophobia is a racializing discourse targeting those women who are not 'Muslim enough' and/or are Western, less pure and inferior to the visibly 'religious' Muslim women donning a headscarf.

Theoretical framing

Hijab as a gendering discourse

To understand the double hijabophobia at play in FIFA's ban of the head cover in 2011–2014, I ground my analysis in Arab and Muslim feminist notions of the *hijab*[4] (Ahmed, 2011; Badran, 2009; Hamzeh, 2012; Lazreg, 2009; Mernissi, 1991). Contextualizing and historicizing Qur'anic verses, Fatima Mernissi (1991) highlighted the multidimensionality of the *hijabs* as visual, spatial, ethical and spiritual. Mernissi

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[1] Islamist, in Arabic *islamawyy* and Islamism, in Arabic *islamawyyah*. Both nouns represent political Islam and the use of religion in governance and politics. Islamism is also what Hoodfar and Ghoreishian assert as "Contemporary religious fundamentalism [that] has focused on reviving patriarchal hierarchy; in various Muslim contexts…Fundamentalists' rhetoric states that male supremacy is ordained by God…Across contexts, they have heralded their singular interpretations of Islam as the only version of the Islam…" (2012, 260–261).

[2] FIFA's Law 4 (2011/2012, 20). This law is also amended by an IFAB decision that prohibits players from revealing basic equipment and clothing with "any political, religious or personal statements" (22). Accessed September 12, 2013, http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/generic/81/42/36/lawsofthegame_2011_12_en.pdf.

[3] In this paper, the category "*Muslim*" is used as a person who interprets and expresses his/her *muslimness* in multiple and fluid ways, not necessarily consistent or only through public and visible religious and piety rituals. Additionally, "Muslim" is used as a political category useful in countering hegemonic representations that constructs a group of people, with some similarities and many differences, as monolithic.

[4] Italicizing *hijab* is meant to reflect its multiple and dynamic meanings beyond its visual dimension expressed in attire.

asserted that 'modest' dress, the visual *hijab*, was required for both Muslim men and women. The visual *hijab* is not an exclusively Islamic prescribed dress or one that only Muslims wear. It is a piece of cloth that some Muslim, Christian and Jewish women have long been wearing (Ahmed, 2011). For Mernissi, the *hijab* in its spatial dimension separates two spaces, specifically the Prophet Muhammad's private spaces from the public. The third *hijab* is ethical. It is the separator of all Muslims from piety and from what is considered forbidden, *haram*. Mernissi (1991) identified a fourth *hijab*, the spiritual. In the Qur'an, this represents the barrier between all Muslims and the deeper knowing of *Allah*, the core message of Islam. Though the spiritual *hijab* is reiterated in ten out of sixteen *hijab*-related Qur'anic verses, it has been undermined and masked by the first three *hijabs* (Hamzeh, 2012).

Through rigorous research and intellectual struggle, or *ijtihad*, Arab and Muslim feminists have focused on transcending the spiritual *hijab* in their commitment to gender justice (Ahmed, 2011; Badran, 2009; Hamzeh, 2012; Mernissi, 1991). Feminist *ijtihad* offers alternative, contextualized, and historicized interpretations of the Qur'anic *hijab* verses. It also identifies the heteronormative uses of the first three *hijabs* and the deployment of a gendering discourse. Contemporary Arab and Muslim feminists have illustrated how a piece of cloth and the policies of gender segregation in public spaces have become the basis for constructing Muslim women's body as a 'problem,' an object needing protection and regulation (Hélie & Hoodfar, 2012).

Race-making and culturalization of racism

To further understand the gendering racializing logics underpinning FIFA's ban of the head cover in 2011, I use several theoretical notions deployed by anti-racist feminists of color in North America and postcolonial critical black feminists in the UK (Mirza, 2013; Razack, 2008; Razack, Smith, & Thobani, 2010; Thobani, 2007; Zine, 2006). First, I use the notion of hijabophobia as a specific form of "ethno-religious and racialized discrimination leveled at Muslim women" (Zine, 2006, 240). This hijabophobia is also the "gendered and raced Islamophobic discourses"…"lived in and through Muslim women's embodied subjectivities" (Mirza, 2013, 7). I call this colonialist hijabophobia. It is a hijabophobia that is "historically entrenched within Orientalist representations that cast colonized Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies" (Zine, 2006, 240). Colonialist hijabophobia is based on a racist gendering logic embedded within Western constructions of Muslim women (Jiwani, 2010; Prouse, 2015). In other words, colonialist hijabophobia is a "cruder version of racism" in which Muslims are perceived as "possessing cultures that are inferior and overly patriarchal" (Razack, 2008, 171).

I also use hijabophobia as another gendering logic deployed by Islamists. It is a hijabophobia that essentializes the Muslim woman by means of a piece of cloth, to differentiate her from the inferior non-believer, the Westerner, and the Muslim who is not 'Muslim enough.' Islamist hijabophobia privileges a superior kind of *muslimness*,[5] and thus, valorizes those women who are 'Muslim enough' differentiated by their way of dressing; especially those Muslim women who are donning an Islamist or state-law prescribed visual *hijab*. In this hijabophobia, the Islamists simultaneously applaud women who wear the headscarf or cloak and demonize women who do not wear it.

Islamist hijabophobia constructs women's bodies as a societal and national problem—sources of obscenity (Hélie & Hoodfar, 2012) needing protection from the gaze of men and containment from the public sphere to protect the Muslim nation from chaos and strife (Hamzeh, 2012; Mernissi, 1991). This way, Islamists distinguish themselves as

pure by essentializing the visual representation of their women's bodies (Hoodfar & Ghoreishian, 2012), the "emblem" of the nation in the case of Iran (Sadr, 2012 in Hélie & Hoodfar, 2012, 182).

Islamist hijabophobia is based on fundamentalist and politicized Islamic values and practices dependent on the ownership of one truth about Islam and about Muslims (Hélie & Hoodfar, 2012). This is the Islamist logic that is based on "male supremacy [that] is ordained by God" (Hoodfar & Ghoreishian, 2012, 260). Islamist logic relies on fundamentalist interpretations of the Qur'an through undemocratic political means, unquestioned theocratic laws and autocratic regimes. It is the logic that closes possibilities of crossing the spiritual *hijab* to alternative ways of knowing and embodying one's *muslimness*. This Islamist logic constructs the nation and its Muslim women as needing protection from the impurity imposed by the 'non-Muslims', the strange West and Western colonizer, as the rapist of the nation and its women.

This Islamist hijabophobia is revived and exaggerated when Muslims have been/are in a war, a time of hyper fear and crisis (Mernissi, 1991; Salime, 2007)—real or manufactured. It is based on the androcentric and decontextualized interpretations of the main visual and spatial *hijab*-related Qur'anic verses that were revealed to the Prophet when He was in exile with few followers in Al Medina (Mernissi, 1991). It is a specific racializing tactic that differentiates Muslim women from non-Muslim women. In Islamic countries, such as Iran, and 'Muslim-*majority*' contexts, like Jordan, the state differentiates *Muslim* women wearing the prescribed *hijab* from non-Muslim women, the racialized other, mainly the 'Westerner' (or 'Westernized') who is inferior to the believers of Islam. As such, Islamist hijabophobia is constructed to assert a recognizable and fixed identity of the nation of Islam, *the ummah*. This construction is also based on Islamist logic that insists on practicing Islam according to a vision of how Muslims lived during the life of the Prophet. Both hijabophobias constrain women's fluid and complex embodiment of their *muslimness*. This became especially obvious in the case of FIFA's ban of the head cover.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger qualitative study examining FIFA's ban of the head cover in 2011. In this article, I analyzed the logics of two hijabophobias—colonialist and Islamist—that constituted this ban. I used a *deveiling* methodology (Hamzeh, 2012), which can be thought of as a synergistic movement of 'plugging in' theoretical notions and data into one another (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). It is a process of analysis that stays away from structural coding, and instead thinks with theory and through theoretical themes. This approach encourages the use of marginalized theories (Lather 2007; St. Pierre 2009) and "inhibits the inclusion of previously unthought "data"" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, 262). Thus, to do deveiling, I have utilized 'plugging in' as a process that "illustrates how knowledge is opened up and proliferated rather than foreclosed and simplified" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, 261). In another publication from the original study (Hamzeh, 2015),, rather than analyze the underlying gendering and racist logics, I interviewed players from the Jordanian National team in Amman to understand how they negotiated the 'hijab ban' of 2011.

The case of FIFA's Law 4

The commissioner's decision to disqualify the Iranian women's team on June 3, 2011, ostensibly based on safety and basic equipment FIFA Law 4, led to meetings over almost three years. Finally, in May 2014, the International Football Association Board (IFAB), the law making body of FIFA, amended Law 4 with specific criteria for wearing a 'protective' headgear on the football field, and thus, reversed 'the *hijab* ban'. This article analyzed the discourses and underlying logics of this disqualification process within several governing agencies of soccer.

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[5] "'*Muslimness*' is the fluidity and multiplicity of one's subjectivities in relation to Islam as a faith…The consequence is that alternative visions of what it may mean to be a Muslim are dismissed as culturally irrelevant…In short, the conventional, commonly used construction of 'Muslimness' derives from a conservative political agenda that seeks to implement an ideal 'Islamic society'"(Hélie & Hoodfar, 2012, 3).